



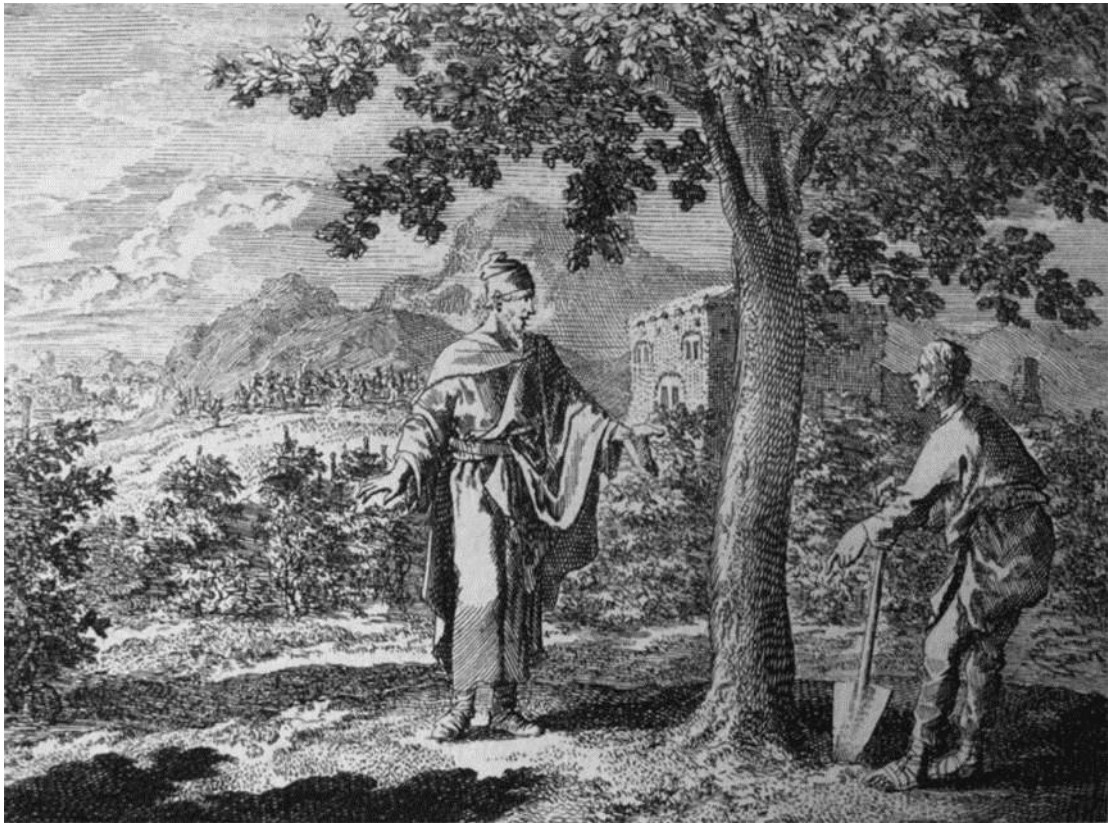
# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

# Third Sunday of Lent C



apud: phillip medhurst

THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE. LUKE 13:6-9. JAN LUYKEN

excudit: harry kossuth

An etching by Jan Luyken illustrating Luke 13:6-9  
in the Bowyer Bible, Bolton, England



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### Prayer in Preparation for Baptism and in Preparation for Renewing Baptismal Promises

Almighty God, who rules all things,  
we hasten with eager steps to the venerable font of eternal salvation,  
and ask you, Magnificent God,  
that you command this font which has been sealed  
may be reopened with the keys of your mercy,  
and impart to those that thirst a most sweet cup of water.  
May the voice of your divinity sound upon these waters,  
may the Spirit of your sanctification dwell therein  
and bring healing to all ill.  
May the abundant streams of paradise flow from it,  
that by your goodness heavenly graces  
may be bestowed upon these new-born children.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Liber Ordium. *Monumenta Ecclesiae Liturgica*, edd. Cabrol and  
Leclercq, Vol. 5, ed. Dom M. Ferotin, Paris, 1904.

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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today is the Third Sunday of Lent. One common theme that is evident in all three readings is that God is intimately involved in the salvation of his people. God cares what happens to his children.
- ▶ Scrutinies are celebrated with those who are preparing for baptism (elect) at the Easter season. There are three scrutinies. The first scrutiny is celebrated on the Third Sunday of Lent, the second scrutiny is celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, and the third scrutiny is celebrated on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Scrutinies are penitential celebrations that help uncover what is still in need of reconciliation and healing in the elect as they prepare for baptism. Cycle A readings are used for the celebration of scrutinies. Thus, if scrutinies are celebrated, use the cycle A readings for the Third Sunday of Lent instead of the readings for this session.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@Five to seven minutes)

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings. (You may want to concentrate on the Gospel alone.)

## First reading: Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15

- ▶ Moses encounters God in the burning bush. God calls himself, "I AM WHO AM." God tells Moses to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves.
- ▶ God calls himself, "I AM WHO AM". Many scholars translate that to mean "*the one who causes all things to exist*." God is telling Moses that he is a God who cares about the lives of those he called into being. He is an active agent in human history.
- ▶ This vignette is a call and commissioning story. God calls Moses and gives him a divine mission.
- ▶ God shows himself to be a God who speaks as well as acts.
- ▶ Moses is in awe of the God he encountered; yet he was also afraid.
- ▶ If he were to accept this charge, what would he tell Pharaoh? Who would he say sent him to Pharaoh?
- ▶ Gods were named according to their characteristics---their temperament, their abilities, etc.
- ▶ Names were very important—one could only enter into a personal relationship with someone as long as names were exchanged.
- ▶ In order to have a significant, human and personal relationship with this God, his name had to be known (even though in essence God was the *Nameless Other*).

- ▶ God responds and lets Moses know by the name he gave him, that he is the God who goes before and with Moses. God is the God in intimate relationship with his people.
- ▶ God is the God who cares about the suffering and oppression of his people.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ Imagine a very difficult situation in your life, or the lives of those you love. Imagine the situation to be terribly oppressive. Now imagine that God appears to you and tells you that you are the one who will take an active role in freeing those you love from the situation. What would be your response? What was Moses’ response and what were the long-range implications of his decision to say yes? What are the implications for our lives and us today?

## Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

- ▶ Prevailing aberrant philosophies and doctrines of this highly intellectual urban center sorely tempted the Corinthian community.
- ▶ The Corinthian community had become lackadaisical in their Christian beliefs and practices. They believed that all one needed in order to be saved was baptism and Eucharist. Period.
- ▶ Paul hearkened back to the exodus as a reminder that salvation was a process. The people worked out their salvation with God through God’s history with them.
- ▶ Baptism begins a similar process. Baptism begins Christ’s saving action in the lives of the person and people who are baptized.
- ▶ The manna and drink in the desert prefigured the nourishment of the Eucharist.
- ▶ Eucharist is food for the journey—*viaticum*---food on the way to the Promised Land.
- ▶ Paul reminded the Corinthians that even in spite of God’s intervention in the lives of the wandering Israelites, they still sinned. They chose not to follow God.
- ▶ Thus, people can *choose* not to be saved. Grace strengthens us to cooperate with God’s saving grace. However, grace cannot be effective in a stubborn, willful heart.





## Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, surface brief insights in wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What does it mean to you when Paul implies that we must cooperate with God’s saving grace?

### Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

### Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ Today’s story is told in the context of a tower that fell, killing some people, and the assassination of Galileans by Pilate.
- ▶ Those who did not experience calamity were considered righteous, and those who did were considered sinners.
- ▶ Jesus put an end to that absurdity. Jesus insists that all people are sinners and are called to repent. The tower did not fall because of God’s displeasure or some sin of victim or the victim’s family.
- ▶ He used the fig tree to illustrate. The fig tree was a sign of God’s blessing of the land of Israel. When the fig tree died it was considered a curse on the land. A good fig was a metaphor for the righteous person; a bad fig was a sign of the sinner. The fig tree was also associated with the dawning of the messianic reign of God.
- ▶ The fig tree in the parable was barren—so barren that it had not produced fruit for three years –beyond restoration (a sign for the sinner). It should have been cut down, but it was given a second chance. It deserved to be cut down because it was beyond hope, but nevertheless was given another chance to produce fruit.
- ▶ The only reason it was spared was due to the gardener’s mercy.
- ▶ The implications? All are unrighteous and in need of cutting down. All are spared because of God’s mercy. All must turn from death (no growth) to life (new growth).



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ Where do you see the attitude of the people in the Gospel today (blessings are a result of righteousness and calamity is a result of sin)?
- ▶ What are the implications of this story for your own life?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this Gospel? In what way does it invite you to grow in faith and to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?
- ▶ In what way does this Gospel invite you more deeply into Christ's life, death and resurrection? (A good question for ongoing reflection in your journal throughout the week.)

### Concluding Prayer

Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite—an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97

Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement

Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)

## APPENDIX

#1. A dear friend with whom I had shared years of life, stories and shared interests began to drastically change. She stopped going to church. She retreated from active participation in our small Christian community. We/I reached out to her, but only in a superficial sort of way. We did not even try to get to the bottom of the situation. Our questions to her were met with strong resistance. So often I heard that *small, still Voice* (I AM WHO AM) urge me to go to her and try to uncover the source of her withdrawal. Yet life became too busy and I ignored that *Voice*. I let the relationship drift apart.

Months later the source of her withdrawal became all too apparent. She had embezzled large sums of money from the Department of Children and Families. She then lured the co-worker who could implicate her onto a quiet street. She murdered the co-worker and then two days later took her own life.

I have often wondered what could have happened differently if I had listened to that *Voice* within. We all look back on our lives with some regrets. I wish I had had the tenacity of Moses to hear the call and go down from that mountain to save—not an entire nation—but just one of God’s lost souls. Perhaps two lives could have been spared. Moses saved an entire nation with God’s help. He listened to God’s call and he responded. It took great courage. We need his courage in our lives. We need simply to listen when God calls.

#2. Many years ago I had an encounter with a young man from an evangelical church who told me that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save him and that no matter what he did in his life, he was going straight to heaven. I told him that as a Catholic I would say, “I have great hope that I am going to heaven. Yes, Jesus saved me, and all of us and we are given the strength--the grace--to cooperate with the salvation he won for us, but we can also choose to lose that salvation. We can willfully decide not to be faithful to God.”

I often say that living with my mentally ill child is my ticket to heaven or my ticket straight to hell. I am constantly faced with a decision to love or not to love. There are days I choose to cooperate with the grace to love as God loves, and there are days when I say, “thanks but no thanks.”

God gives me the opportunity to see into the eyes, not just of my very sick child, but also of all those other mother’s children who are on the streets. I can turn a blind eye to them just as easily as I can choose not to love when dealing with the difficult days of this illness in my own home.

However, I have been uplifted, strengthened and nourished at the Lord’s Table and it is truly my own *viaticum* on this struggle to maintain peace and harmony in

the midst of insanity. God does work in the lives of his children. Salvation is truly a process.

#3. I can very easily fall prey to the axiom, “What did I do to deserve this?” The thinking of the people of Jesus’ day is alive and well today. We are presently watching the horror of the earthquakes in Haiti. Sadly a prominent evangelical minister just blamed the horror on the poor people. This Gospel speaks directly to his uncharitable, unjust, and insensitive remarks. He insisted the people made a pact with the devil in their history and thus are being punished by God.

Jesus says, “Everyone is a sinner.” God sends rain on the just and the unjust. God does not send calamity to punish sinners. God uses calamity to invite growth and deeper intimacy with him, however.

Why are we so quick to assign blame to God when in fact, the major loss of life in Haiti is a result of human foibles—corruption when it comes to building code enforcements and policies forged between our nation and Haiti that caused a major influx of people into the city from the countryside in a city that was known to be lying in wait for a major earthquake? Earthquakes are natural disasters. God did not send them to maim, brutalize and kill small children and adults.

Are we all sinners? “Yes,” says Jesus. We are all in need of repentance. Sometimes the sin in our lives—the human condition--can cause bad things to happen. I can expect to get lung cancer if I smoke. God does not, however, say to the poor smoker, “I am going to give you lung cancer because you smoke.” Life happens. There is cause and effect to what happens in life. Some happenings in life are natural occurrences and other happenings are a result of our own doing---mistakes, negligence, corruption, greed, etc. We do not know the hour of our deaths and thus must be prepared at all times. But Jesus says God’s mercy is greater than our sin.

God must be wiping away his own tears that a shepherd of his flock so shamefully puts blame on poor innocent victims for the horror they just experienced. The sin that is so often committed in his name defies description. I am called to suffer with my brothers and sisters in Haiti, to respond in whatever way I can, and to be an authentic agent of the Gospel when it comes to teaching that is not only false, but places huge burdens on the backs of so many of God’s poor children.





## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

*Salvation  
Sin and Grace  
Cross of Christ*

*Sacrament of Reconciliation  
Eschatology: Heaven, Hell,  
Purgatory*

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### **SALVATION**

Today's liturgy is an invitation to acknowledge our need for salvation—to recognize that salvation is a process, the heart of which is God's abiding relationship with people throughout human history. We are all sinners in need of saving—all three readings attest to God's action in the midst of human sinfulness. Today's session will focus on SALVATION.

### **SIN AND GRACE**

Today's Gospel is reminder of the glory that awaits us—the grace we all share. It is also a reminder of why Jesus had to make that final journey to Jerusalem—the sins of the world. Today's liturgy is a reminder that we are all sinners, but God is greater than our sin and desires to give us the grace to endure. Today's extended session will focus on the Church's teaching regarding SIN AND GRACE.

### **CROSS OF CHRIST**

Today's readings remind us that we are all sinners in need of salvation. We are saved by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Each of us is invited to join to calamities, sufferings and joys of our lives to the Paschal mystery of Christ. Today's session will address the Cross of Christ and the Paschal Mystery.

### **SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION**

Lent is a time we focus on the areas of sin in our lives and our need for God's mercy. It is also a time when the church offers multiple opportunities to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of reconciliation extends God's mercy and the reconciling presence of Christ to us sinners. Today's liturgy reminds us that we are all sinners---no one is purely righteous before God. We are blessed with the grace of this sacrament to assist us in this process of salvation. Today's doctrinal session will focus on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

### ESCHATOLOGY: heaven, hell, purgatory

One cannot speak of righteousness and sin without considering the implications...what does it mean to be saved? There are implications for this life, but there are also implications for the afterlife. Jesus reminds us today that we have all been given a second chance through the sacrifice of Christ. We can choose to cooperate with God's saving grace or not. There are implications for our future. Thus today's extended doctrinal session will focus on the church's teaching regarding the after life-heaven, hell and purgatory under the title Eschatology (*end things*).